PROFILE OF A SERIAL ARSONIST:
THE JOHN ORR FEDERAL INVESTIGATION

During the course of a career in the field of fire investigation, virtually every Investigator has one case that stands alone as being particularly unique or significant. Over the past 20 years, while assigned as an Investigator for the Los Angeles City Fire Department Arson Investigation Section, I have been involved in virtually every type of investigation imaginable, including a few cases that defy description.

However, the singular investigation that has had the most profound impact on me personally and professionally began in the Spring of 1991 while I was assigned to work with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Los Angeles Arson Task Force.

This case would soon develop into a hunt for the most prolific and devastating serial arsonist in California State history. It also became personal when it was discovered that the suspect was one of our own, Captain John Orr, Fire Investigator for the Glendale Fire Department, Glendale, California.

After John Orr was identified as the suspect in the ongoing federal investigation, Los Angeles County Deputy District Attorney Michael Cabral formed the District Attorney's Arson Task Force to look into applicable State penal code violations committed by John Orr.

The following is a synopsis of the John Orr federal investigation. My partners and co-lead Investigators on this case were ATF Special Agent Michael Matassa and Special Agent April Carroll.

On March 27, 1991, Investigators from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department contacted the Los Angeles Arson Task Force and requested assistance at the scene of a commercial structure fire in Lawndale, California. ATF Special Agent Ken Croke and I, LAFD Arson Investigator Glen Lucero, responded to the location.

While on scene, we were informed of several other structure fires that had occurred on this same day in commercial occupancies. Further investigation revealed that a series of five separate arson fires had occurred to commercial businesses in relatively close geographical proximity to each other.

The Los Angeles Arson Task Force looked into each of the fires and determined that they had occurred chronologically beginning in Lawndale, California, then proceeding through Redondo Beach, and concluding with two fires in Inglewood, California. The fires resulted in a total dollar loss in excess of $700,000.

Arson Task Force Investigators determined that the fires were set by a person employing a time-delay incendiary device. Furthermore, all of the fires had been set in similar, easily ignitable materials during peak business hours.

Investigators recovered an intact incendiary time-delay device from Stats Floral Supply in Redondo Beach, California. The device consisted of paper matches secured to a cigarette by means of a rubberband and placed inside a sheet of folded, yellow notebook paper. The device successfully ignited, but was discovered before it spread to the adjacent combustible products.

Investigators determined that the same person was responsible for setting each of the fires. This determination was based on a number of factors, including the geographical proximity of the fires as they related to the chronological sequence, the time of day, types of occupancies, first materials ignited, and the singularly unique type of incendiary time-delay device used to start the fire.

Due to the serious life-threat potential created by this particular serial arsonist, a meeting was immediately convened between the Los Angeles City Fire Department and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. It was decided that additional Investigators from each of these agencies would be detailed to the Los Angeles Arson Task Force to assist in this case.

One ATF Agent and one LAFD Arson Investigator was selected to be the lead Investigators for this case. A series of working meetings began in which Investigators from other fire and law enforcement agencies were invited to attend and participate.

As a result of the meetings, a law enforcement bulletin describing the details of our fires was issued to agencies throughout the State of California. Additionally, information flyers were made and then hand carried by Arson Task Force Investigators members to virtually every fire department in Southern California. Information was also disseminated at various meetings of local fire Investigators.

As a result of this concerted effort, Investigators began receiving information of similar fires that had occurred throughout the State. Some of the fires dated as far back as 1987. A check of the LAFD records, going back only as far as December 10, 1990, revealed 13 additional commercial structure fires that closely matched the modus operandi of those set by the Southbay Serial Arsonist. The fires resulted in more than $18,000,000 in total dollar loss.

On April 1, 1991, Investigators received information indicating a possible connection of the Los Angeles fires to a series of fires that occurred in the Fresno, Tulare, and Bakersfield areas of the Central Valley of California in early 1987.

On April 3, 1991, Los Angeles Arson Task Force Iinvestigators received information from the Atascadero and Morro Bay Police Departments regarding a series of fires that occurred in March of 1989, along the Central California coast.

All of the fires, in both the Central Valley in 1987 and the Central Coast area in 1989, were set in commercial occupancies during peak business hours in easily ignitable materials. Local Investigators in each of the series of fires recovered an intact, incendiary time-delay device identical to the one recovered in Redondo Beach, California.

Arson Task Force Investigators were dispatched to Bakersfield and Atascadero, California, to reinterview all witnesses and obtain all reports and physical evidence.

A review of the police and fire reports from the Central Valley area revealed that a series of seven structure fires had occurred to commercial occupancies in a four-day period from January 13-16, 1987. Each of the fires occurred during business hours in readily ignitable materials and were determined by Investigators to have been set with incendiary time-delay devices. The fires resulted in a combined structure and content loss in excess of $700,000.

The first three fires occurred in Fresno, California. At one of the fires, which occurred at the House of Fabrics, the remains of an incendiary time-delay device were recovered. The next two fires were set in the City of Tulare, California. Investigators recovered the remains of another incendiary time-delay device from the Bargain Center Fire.

The last two fires in this series occurred in Bakersfield, California, on January 16, 1987. The remains of an incendiary time-delay device was recovered from Craftmart. Investigators recovered a fingerprint from this device and submitted it for analysis through the State Department of Justice (DOJ) California Identification Index (CII). However, they were unable to match the print to any individual.

All of the Central Valley fires were started in the same manner, within driving time of each other, with close freeway on/off access and enroute from Fresno towards the Los Angeles area. Local Investigators, at the time, voiced concern that the fires coincided precisely with the January California Conference of Arson Investigators (CCAI) seminar that was being held in Fresno, California.

A review of the police and fire reports from the Central Coast area revealed that a series of six structure fires had occurred to commercial occupancies from March 3-9, 1989. Each of the fires occurred during business hours in readily ignitable materials and resulted in a combined structure and content loss of approximately $1,000,000.

The Cities of Morrow Bay, Salinas, and San Luis Obispo each sustained one fire and the City of Atascadero sustained three separate fires in succession. Investigators recovered an incendiary time-delay device from Pacific Home Improvement in Atascadero, California. This device was identical to the devices recovered in Bakersfield and Redondo Beach, California. Local Investigators, being aware of the 1987 Central Valley fires, were concerned because their fires coincided with the Symposium IV Arson Seminar at the Asilomar Conference grounds, Pacific Grove, California.

As a result of this concern, Investigators obtained a list of the attendees to both the 1989 Symposium IV Seminar and the 1987 CCAI Seminar and cross matched them. A list of ten names were identified as having attended both of the seminars.

The fingerprints of the ten members of the fire service were compared with the latent print recovered off of the incendiary time-delay device recovered from the Craftmart fire in Bakersfield, California, on January 16, 1987. The results of the comparison were negative.

In April of 1991, Arson Task Force Investigators recovered the latent print from the 1987 Craftmart fire in Bakersfield and submitted it to the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, Latent Print Section, for processing through DOJ. This was done, and the results were again negative.

The latent fingerprint experts at the Sheriff's Laboratory observed that they had been provided with a negative for the fingerprint, which they attempted to enlarge and enhance. This procedure enabled them to locate several additional points of identification. After this process, the experts resubmitted the enhanced fingerprint through DOJ.

On April 16, 1991, Arson Task Force Investigators were notified that DOJ had made a confirmed identification on the latent print. The print was identified as belonging to John Leonard Orr, date of birth, April 26, 1949. John Orr was well known to many members of the Los Angeles Arson Task Force as the Captain of the Glendale Fire Department Arson Unit.

During this period of time, Arson Task Force Investigators obtained the remains of another incendiary time-delay device which had been recovered from a fire that occurred on December 14, 1990, at the Builder's Emporium in Los Angeles, California.

On April 22, 1991, the Arson Task Force received information that an Arson Investigator's Officer Safety Course was being offered in San Luis Obispo, California, from April 29, 1991, to May 3, 1991. It was further determined that John Orr was going to attend.

On April 26, 1991, Arson Task Force Investigators initiated a 24-hour surveillance of John Orr. On April 28, 1991, John Orr departed for a week-long conference in San Luis Obispo, California. Task Force members employed the use of a tracking device attached to John Orr's vehicle, along with numerous ground units for this surveillance. Additionally, an LAFD Arson Investigator was enrolled in the course to moniter John Orr during class.

On April 30, 1991, Investigators observed John Orr, who is a non-smoker, purchase two packs of cigarettes. On May 3, 1991, John Orr completed his seminar and drove into downtown San Luis Obispo. While there, he discovered the antenna for the tracking device. He then drove to the San Luis Obispo Police Department where they directed John Orr to the police explosive ordinance range.

Arson Task Force Investigators immediately went to the police department and informed the Watch Commander of the ongoing investigation. The Watch Commander then called the EOD Rangemaster, who met with John Orr, and attempted to convince him that the tracking unit was actually a hoax device placed on his vehicle by one of the other students from the Officer Safety Course. Range personnel removed the tracking device from John Orr's vehicle prior to his leaving the facility.

The following morning, John Orr checked his vehicle for devices, but he did not seem overly cautious nor appeared to be aware of the surveillance. The surveillance terminated on May 5, 1991, upon John Orr's arrival at his residence.

On May 31, 1991, a meeting was held with representatives of the Los Angeles Arson Task force, the United States Attorney's Office, and Officers with the Glendale Police Department Internal Affairs Unit. The representatives from Glendale were briefed on the investigation and notified of the name of the suspect.

On June 12, 1991, Arson Task Force Investigators met with the Fire Marshal from the Glendale Fire Department and established a direct liaison that was to last for the duration of the investigation. It was at this meeting that the existence of a manuscript written by John Orr was first mentioned by the Glendale Fire Marshal.

The Glendale Fire Marshal stated that John Orr had given him a copy of the manuscript to read, as to liability, because the Glendale Fire Department was mentioned in it several times. He further indicated that, after reading the novel, he saw a completely different side of John Orr, a very negative one.

He stated that the novel is about a serial arsonist, and he described the tone of the book as being very "dark and smutty." Additionally, he said that John Orr really detailed what went on in the mind of an arsonist, and he found the manuscript to be bizarre and a little "off." Investigators requested the Chief to obtain a copy of the manuscript if he had the opportunity.

A photo lineup of John Orr was developed, and teams were dispatched to show the lineup to witnesses involved in the fires in the Los Angeles, Fresno, and Atascadero areas.

Investigators learned that John Orr was going to attend the CCAI seminar in Fresno, California, scheduled to begin on July 31, 1991. A surveillance operational plan was established. Additionally, two Arson Task Force Investigators were enrolled in the conference to maintain a watch during the seminar.

On July 30, 1991, John Orr departed Los Angeles enroute to the CCAI seminar in Fresno, California. The following day, during a presentation on Juvenile Firesetters, the inside surveillance team reported that they lost visual contact with Orr. They reported this at approximately 2:40 p.m. At 3:03 p.m. a rubbish fire broke out approximately 50 to 70 yards away from where John Orr was last observed. The fire was determined to be suspicious in origin.

The surveillance was terminated upon John Orr's return to Los Angeles. Prior to leaving for Los Angeles, John Orr was observed searching his vehicle for a tracking device.

By now, the Los Angeles Arson Task Force had recovered a total of six incendiary time-delay devices. Analysis of the devices by the ATF Laboratory revealed that they were all similar in design and composition.

In August of 1991, The Arson Task Force obtained a copy of a videotape from the Glendale Fire Department. This tape consisted of fire footage taken by John Orr of two

commercial structure fires in progress. Both of these fires matched the M.O. of the serial arsonist and were outside the city limits of Glendale. John Orr was on duty when he filmed the fires.

During this period of time, numerous Grand Jury subpoenas were served in the Los Angeles, Fresno, and Atascadero areas for various hotel records, phone tolls, and bank records related to John Orr. Additionally, witnesses were identified that could place John Orr in four businesses prior to their fires.

A search of John Orr's personnel file at the Glendale Fire Department revealed that he was on duty and unable to verify his location when each of the Los Angeles area fires were set.

In October of 1991, a Federal Grand Jury in Los Angeles, California, indicted John Orr for violation of eight counts of Title 18 United States Code, Section 844 (I) (Arson). Included in this indictment were the People's Department Store and Builder's Emporium, located in Los Angeles, California.

On November 22, 1991, Investigators obtained a copy of a manuscript written by John Orr titled, "Points Of Origin." The story is a "fictional" account of a Los Angeles Firefighter who is a serial arsonist. The arsonist uses incendiary time-delay devices to set commercial businesses on fire. The arsonist also set fires in Fresno, Tulare, and Bakersfield, California, while traveling to and from the CCAI seminar in Fresno, California.

On December 3, 1991, Investigators obtained a Federal Arrest Warrant for John Orr for violations of Federal Arson Statutes. On December 4, 1991, Investigators from the Los Angeles City Fire Department, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, Los Angeles Police Department, and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, arrested John Orr at his residence without incident and placed him in Federal custody.

On January 9, 1992, a Federal Grand Jury in Fresno, California, indicted John Orr for violation of five counts of Title 18 United States Code, Section 844 (I) (Arson). As a result of various appeals being processed in Los Angeles, it was decided to proceed on the five counts of arson in the Eastern Judicial District of California (Fresno). As a result, a trial was conducted, and on July 31, 1992, John Orr was convicted in Federal Court on three counts of arson.

On November 2, 1992, the United States Court for the Eastern Judicial District of California sentenced John Orr to ten years in Federal prison for each of the three counts,

consecutive, for a total of 30 years. Additionally, John Orr was ordered to pay $225,971 in restitution.

On March 24, 1993, John Orr was scheduled to begin trial in the Central Judicial District of California (Los Angeles). On the first day of trial, John Orr entered a guilty plea to three counts of the eight count indictment. John Orr's admission of guilt came after a lengthy plea agreement was signed by the United States Attorney's Office, the defendant (Orr), and his defense counsel. U.S. District Court Judge Edward Rafeedie accepted John Orr's change of plea and scheduled sentencing for May 12, 1993.

John Orr pled guilty to counts one, three, and five of the indictment. Count one charges the attempted the attempted arson of Pacific Home Improvement Center, Atascadero, California, on March 9, 1989. Count three charges the arson of Coast to Coast hardware, Atascadero, California, on March 9, 1989. John Orr committed these arson crimes after attending the Symposium IV Arson Seminar in Pacific Grove, California. John Orr further pled guilty to count five, which charged the attempted arson of Builders Emporium, in Los Angeles, California.

John Orr admitted in Federal Court that he entered each of these locations with an incendiary time-delay device and that it was his intention to destroy the property and structure by means of fire.

On May 12, 1993, U.S. District Court Judge Edward Rafeedie imposed the following sentence and conditions of sentence upon John Orr for his guilty plea to arson:

1. 96 months imprisonment on each count, to be served concurrently to each other. This sentence to be served concurrently with the 30-year sentence previously imposed on John Orr in the Eastern Judicial District.

2. The term of imprisonment is to be followed by three years supervised release on each count (concurrently) and to include extensive psychiatric treatment.

3. Judge Rafeedie imposed a $150 assessment fee, however, no restitution was ordered based on John Orr's current financial status.

John Orr was sentenced to the Terminal Island Federal Correctional Institute, in San Pedro, California, pending the beginning of his trial in State Court.